World Journal of Islamic History and Civilization, 1 (3): 163-167, 2011
ISSN 2225-0883

The *Al-s~biã'n* (The Sabians): An Overview from the Quranic Commentators, Theologians and Jurists

Muhammad Azizan Sabjan

Department of Philosophy and Civilization, School of Humanities,
Universiti Sains Malaysia

Abstract: The term 'al-S~biã'n,' as literally employed in the Qur'~nic commentaries, denotes "peoples who shift from one religion to another" or "peoples who take on a new religion other than their own." This term is the plural of s~b§' and it derives from the root sab~, which signifies "turn to" or "lean towards to." The term al-S~biã'n as applied in the Qur'~n indicates various technical meanings since almost all commentators of the Qur'~n and the earliest scholars have left the identification of al-S~biã'n vague. Such a vague identification is plausible since al-S~biã'n is represented by a conglomerate of various views comprising remnants of sects who were oriented to cultic practices, ancient heathen sects of several nationalities, namely Greeks, Persians and Indians and sects who were Neo-Platonic in their origin and character. This paper thus has a distinct purpose. It attemps to exhibit the features of the Sabians as perceived and conceived by the Quranic Commentators, Theologians and Jurists. It is hoped that the paper will provide a preliminary yet clear understanding of the Sabians as interpreted by them.

Key words: Sabians % Quranic Commentators % Theologians % Jurists % People of a Dubious Book

INTRODUCTION

Al-S~biã'n (the Sabians) is illustrated in three Qur'~nic passages. In all three places, the term *al-S~biã'n* is mentioned along with the Jews and the Christians. One of them is presented as follows:

> *Verily, those "who have attained faith" (~manã) as well as "those who follow the "Jewish faith" (alladh§na h~dã) and "the Christians" (al-nas~r~) and "the Sabians" (al-s~bi§'n)---"all who believe in All~h and the Last Day and work righteousness" (man amana bill~h wa al-yaumil al-~khir wa 'amila s~lih~n)---shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear nor shall they grieve. (Sãrat al-Baqarah, 2:62)* [1].

The term '*al-S~biã'n,*' as literally employed in the Qur'~nic commentaries, denotes "peoples who shift from one religion to another" or "peoples who take on a new religion other than their own." This term is the plural of *s~b§'* and it derives from the root *sab~*, which signifies "turn to" or "lean towards to" [2-7].

The term *al-S~biã'n* as applied in the Qur'~n indicates various technical meanings since almost all commentators of the Qur'~n and the earliest scholars have left the identification of *al-S~biã'n* vague. Such a vague identification is plausible since *al-S~biã'n* is represented by a conglomerate of various views comprising remnants of sects who were oriented to cultic practices, ancient heathen sects of several nationalities, namely Greeks, Persians and Indians and sects who were Neo-Platonic in their origin and character [8].

***Al-s~biã'n* (The Sabians) According to the Qur'~nic Commentators:** Al-Tabar§'s opening explanation of the Sabians is extensive and varied. Noting the different opinions of the Companions and of the Successors, he summarizes the Sabians as follows. (a). They are the people who do not adhere to any traditional religion, but are monotheists and claim to be the possessors of revelation from All~h, (b). They are the people known as the followers of Prophet Nãh (Peace Be Upon Him), (c). They are the people who are monotheists and believe in the Psalms of David, (d). They are a group of people belonging to the category of People of the Book, (e). They are a group of people falling in between the Jews and the Christians, (f). They are the people falling in

Corresponding Author: Muhammad Azizan Sabjan, Department of Philosophy and Civilization, School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Tel: +60194460672, Fax: +6046563707.

between the Jews and the Zoroastrians, (g). They are the people falling in between the Christians and the Zoroastrians, (h). They are the people who believe in monotheism but they belong neither to the Jewish faith, nor to the Christians, nor to the Zoroastrians, nor do they have any revealed book and specific religious laws, (i). They are the people who are monotheists but worship stars and angels and (j). They are the people who are dualists and do not have any scripture [2].

Al-Tãs§'s commentary on the Sabians closely follows the pattern set by al-Tabar§. He, too, is fascinated with the identity of the Sabians and devoted a good proportion of his commentary on this term to them, recounting the various theories that have been proposed to establish the identity of this group. After enumerating several definitions of the Sabians, which are rather similar to that of al-Tabar§, he strongly propounded that they are not the People of the Book. Such a rebuff is a sign of al-Tãs§'s stricter definition of the People of the Book than most commentators are [3, 9].

With al-Zamakhshar§, the various identifications of the Sabians are reduced to a single choice. Instead of prolonging these identifications, he simply puts that the Sabians are those who worship angels, belonging neither to the Jews nor to the Christians [7, 10]. Following closely the pattern left by al-Zamakhshar§ is al-R~z§ who briefly notes that the Sabians are of the people belonging to the Zoroastrians. They worship angels, revere the sun and perform five times daily prayer facing it [5]. Ibn Kath§r's preferred elucidation of the Sabians is that taken from several of his predecessors. However, in enumerating the characteristics of this group he has cited one crucial assertion that they are of the people whose genuine prophetic message has not reached them [11].

The two twentieth-century commentaries, those of Muhammad 'Abduh Khayruddin and Muhammad Rash§d Rid}a also have good discussion on the Sabians. Muh}ammad 'Abduh, as noted previously, espouses that the Sabians belong to the category of the People of the Book on the basis that they are mentioned along with the Jews and the Christians.

Muhammad Rash§d Rida also affirms that the Sabians belong to the category of the People of the Book. However, he enters the treatment of the Sabians with an extended consideration of the prophetic void between '¦s~ and Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Them). According to him those people who are born during the arrival of no prophet between these two are considered as *Ahl Fatrah* (People of the Interval). He, however, limits the People of the Interval only to the people like the Arabs who believe in a prophet but do not have specific laws to exercise with, or to the people where authentic prophetic message has not reached them [12].

Concerning the Jews and Christians who have the benefit of exposure to both the teachings of Mãs~ and '¦s~ (Peace Be Upon Them), they are not considered *Ahl Fatrah* for they have received revelations and laws which later have suffered from neglect and alteration. Moreover, should they want to seek the truth, they can still search it from their religions which are not entirely distorted and blocked and from the people who are still exercising the true teachings of these prophets. Suffice it to say, since the original teachings of their prophets are still available, the Jews and Christians are thus excluded from belonging to the category of the People of the Interval. However, for those of the Jews and Christians who have never been exposed to the teachings of these prophets, they are considered 'saved' (*n~jãn*) as long as some other authentic prophetic message has not reached them [12].

Having clarified the Jews and Christians, Muhammad Rash§d Rida then views the Sabians from two perspectives. First, he views them as a possible result of Christian heresy, noting that should the Sabians place faith in Christianity, they are not considered as *Ahl Fatrah* since they have adhered to corrupted religion. Second, he takes them as adherents of an independent religious tradition, likens them to the original monotheistic Arabs (*hunaf~*') and put them as a part of *Ahl Fatrah* [9, 12].

With al-Tab~tab~'§, the exegetical delineation of the Sabians takes a different turn. In his treatment of the Sabians, he does not echo Muhammad Rash§d Rida's earlier arguments. Yet, he firmly opines that they are of the dualist people (*al-Wathniyyah*) who worship idols and stars [13].

Asad, in this respect, propounds that the Sabians would probably be a monotheistic religious group falling in between Judaism and Christianity. The term *al-S~biã'n* would probably derived from the Aramaic verb "*tsebha'*'," which signifies "he immersed himself in waters." Pushing the same point still further, Asad asserts that this term would indicate that they were followers of Prophet Yah}y~ (Peace Be Upon Him) and this can be verified through the community of the Mandaeans who are still living in Iraq. However, these Sabians are not to be perplexed with the so-called "Sabians of Harr~n," a gnostic sect that existed in the early centuries of Islam. In effect, the Sabians of Harr~n have deliberately adopted the name of the true Sabians in order to obtain the advantages accorded by the Muslims to the followers of every monotheistic faith, Asad stresses [14].

Al-s~biã'n **(The Sabians) According to the Theologians:** In discovering the nature of the Sabians apropos the theologians, it would be useful to start with al-B§rãn§'s exploitation of them since he is one of the earliest scholars who have conducted a series of researches in religionswissenschaft. Al-B§rãn§, in his views of the Sabians, organized them into two groups, that is, the polytheistic Sabians and the monotheistic Sabians.

Concerning the polytheistic Sabians, he contends that this group was derived from a sect called *al-Harr~niyyah* (the Harranians) whose name probably was associated with the pseudo-prophet of India, Budhasaf, or taken from Haran Ibn Terah, a brother of Ibr~h§m. According to al-B§rãn§ this group cannot be the Sabians referred to in the Qur'~n since its followers, the Harranians, are heathens and idolaters who worship the sun, the moon, the planets and the primal elements as the ultimate holy beings. Apart from being idolaters, they also believe that some of their philosophers and sages such as Hermes, Pythagoras, Agathodaemon and Baba are prophets and hence adopted their teachings. These Harranians, contends al-B§rãn§, are more established than the original Sabians and it is they who adopted the name "Sabians" in order to attain the *dhimm§* status (the people whose protection is covenanted on behalf of All~h and His Prophet) under the Abbasid [15, 16].

The monotheistic Sabians, according to al-B§rãn§, probably were the remnants of the Jewish tribes who chose to remain in Babylonia while the rest sojourned to Jerusalem during the time of Cyrus and Artaxerxes. In Babylonia, they were attracted to the rites of the Magians [14-18] and, thus, adopted a system which is a mixture of Magism and Judaism like that of the Samaritans in Syria. Relating some information concerning their faith, al-B§rãn§ writes, they professed monotheism, addressed All~h metaphorically and exempted Him from anything that is bad, unjust and wrong. Despite such a monotheistic belief, they highly admired the Light and they attributed the rule of the universe to the celestial globe and its bodies, which they considered as living, speaking, hearing and seeing beings. They name their temples and images after the celestial bodies and their priests made offerings and sacrifices to these images as well as to the stars. Among their rituals are the three obligatory prayers as well as three supplementary prayers, which they performed once a day facing toward the North Pole. They did not circumcise but do have diet restrictions. Their penal code and regulations concerning women were close to that of the Muslims whereas others, such as believing that corpses are polluted, were more similar with the injunctions in the Torah [15, 16].

With Ibn Hazm, the two groups of Sabians are reduced to a single choice. In other words, instead of commenting on the Harranians he directly proceeds with the real Sabians, which he considers as belonging to the People of the Book. However, his treatment of the Sabians is rather vague and disorganized. He neither provides sufficient information concerning their identification and history nor indicates any detailed doctrines and scriptures of their religion. Rather, he forthrightly writes that these peoples belong to one of the oldest religious traditions in the world. They believed in more than One Sustainer of the universe. They revered the Seven Stars and the twelve Signs of Zodiac. They put pictorial representation of angels and images in their temple. This practice, insists Ibn Hazm, leads to the tradition of idolatry all over the world. However, in terms of their rituals, they were close to the Muslims. They fast in Ramad~n and refrained themselves from taking the meat of the dead animal and of swine. They revered both Mecca and the Ka'bah and they perform prayer towards it.

With the passage of time, pursues Ibn Hazm, they began to make changes to their beliefs by altering their religious laws and code of life, thus, making them worse than their former beliefs. Hence, All~h sends them Prophet Ibr~h§m [5,11] (Peace Be upon Him) with the straight and true religion. His mission, thus, is to right the wrongs in the Sabians religious code of life. According to Ibn Hazm, the remnants of this group who are still closest to their original teachings are known as *Hunaf~'* (Monotheistic Believers) during the apostle of Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) [19].

With al-Shahrast~n§, however, the nature of the Sabians changed. As noted, instead of categorizing them as belonging to the People of the Book, he perspicaciously refines them into new category, which he calls the People of a Dubious Book. Such a designated name, reiterates al-Shahrast~n§, is due to their role as the holders of sacred scrolls. His portrayal of the Sabians, though brief and less comprehensive, nevertheless still demonstrates his first hand knowledge of them. In describing the Sabians, he, too, does not mention the Harranian Sabians. Instead, he forthrightly points to the Sabians of the People of a Dubious Book.

He writes that there are two major groups of people during the prophethood of Prophet Ibr~h§m (Peace Be Upon Him). The first group is called *Hunaf~'* (Monotheistic Believers). They are those who retain the original teachings of their earlier prophets. With the advent of Prophet Ibr~h§m (Peace Be Upon Him), they, thus, place faith in him. The second group is the Sabians, the worshipper of the Seven Stars and the believer in more than One Sustainer of the universe. It is unto this group that Prophet Ibr~h§m (Peace Be Upon Him) has greatly summoned to the true faith. He then corrects what the Sabians had invented in terms of their reverence and worship of the stars and the idols. From thereon, those who followed Prophet Ibr~h§m (Peace Be Upon Him) were known as the true believers, i.e., Muslims, whereas those who chose to disbelieve in him still lived in error and went astray. Al-Shahrast~n§, noticing that the Sabians have received most of their influences from the earlier prophets who come with the sacred scrolls, asserts that it is on this basis that they are designated as the People of a Dubious Book [7, 20].

***Al-s~biã'n* (The Sabians) According to the Jurists:** As might be expected, the nature of the Sabians in accordance to the jurists offers repetitive information. Needless to say, none of the jurists comment at length on the Sabians except that they echo the various interpretations that have already been discussed. However, considering the fact that there are still differences of opinions emerging from their treatment of the Sabians, an attempt is made to scantly present their point of view.

Abã Han§fah initiates his examination of the Sabians by classifying them as the People of the Book [21, 22] They are categorized under Christian heresies that recite *Kit~b al-Zabãr* (the Psalms of David) instead of *Kit~b al-Inj§l* (the Evangel). Although Abã Han§fah considers them as the People of the Book, yet he still maintains that they venerate stars and idols [7, 22]. Quite different interpretations are advocated by his successors, the Hanafites. Among them Abã Yãsuf Ya'qãb Ibn Ibr~h§m al-Ans~r§ (d.182/798) and Muhammad Ibn al-Hasan al-Shaib~n§ (d.187/802) who, by contrast, assert that the Sabians are not the People of the Book. Quoting the same view but with a more stringent approach is Abã al-Hasan al-Karkh§ 'Ubaidull~h Ibn al-Husain, another prominent successor of Abã Han§fah. Viewing the Sabians from two perspectives, he espouses that should the Sabians adhere to Christianity they are considered the People of the Book. Otherwise, they are the stars worshipper [7, 23].

M~lik Ibn Anas (d.179/795) differed from Abã Han§fah. He offers that the Sabians are those of the polytheists who do not have any revealed book and specific religious laws. The same pattern is followed by the Malikites who disagreed with Abã Han§fah in terms of the Sabians being a Christian heresy. Instead, they strongly affirm their master's view that the Sabians are nothing but idols worshippers whose religion had suffered neglect and adulteration [7, 23].

Whilst al-Sh~fi'§ postpones his view of this group due to its obscure identity [23], the Sh~fi'§tes in turn stipulate that should the Sabians adhere closely to the fundamental teachings of Christianity, they are considered part of Christianity. In contrast, should the Sabians adhere only to the branches of Christianity teaching, they are incontrovertibly not one of them [7]. Quoting the same view without much assessment are Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (d.241/855) and his successors, the Han~bilites. They merely reaffirm and accept previous views of this group which are taken mostly from that of Abã Han§fah and the Sh~fi'§tes [7,23].

CONCLUSION

Having presented the range of meanings offered for the term *al-S~biã'n*, now it is convenient to administer an evaluation of the Sabians. It is apparent that the above scholars have two general opinions. First, they agree that the Harranian Sabians are polytheists and they are not the Sabians referred to in the Qur'~n. Second, all of them agree that the Sabians referred to in the Qur'~n are the "Monotheistic Sabians" such as those Arabs, the Jews and Christians, who followed the religion of Ibr~h§m, Mãs~ and '¦s~ (Peace Be Upon Them) before its corruption and adulteration. It is these Sabians along with the Jews and the Christians that All~h praises as not only true Muslims but also considered among those who conscious of All~h (*muttaq§n*) who follow the divine and prophetic guidance (*hud~*).

Brief Biography: *Muhammad Azizan Sabjan* was formerly an Arabic and Islamic Education teacher. Presently, he is a lecturer at the Department of Philosophy and Civilization, School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia. He is also the coordinator for Comparative Religion Course and one of the lecturers in Islamic and Asian Civilizations Course at the same school. He obtained his B.A. degree in Islamic Education from the University of Malaya and was awarded the M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Islamic Thought with a specialization in Comparative Religion from the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM).

REFERENCES

1. (Sãrat al-M~i'dah, 5:69) and (Sãrat al-Hajj, 22: 17).
2. Al-Tabari, M.J., 2001. J~mi' al-Bay~n fi Tafs§r al-Qur'~n. Ed. by Mahmãd Sh~kir. 30 vols. Beirut: D~r Ihy~' al-Tur~th al-'Arab§. 1: 252.
3. Al-Tãs§, M.H., n.d. al-Tiby~n f§ Tafs§r al-Qur~n. Ed. by Agh~ Buzruk al-Tahr~n§. 10 vols. Beirut: Ihy~' al-Tur~th al-'Arab§., 1: 282.
4. Al-Ragh§b, 1992. al-Mufrad~t Alfaz al Quran. Damsyik: Dar al Qalam., pp: 276.
5. Al-Razi, F.D., 1991. al-Tafs§ r al-Kab§ r. 16 vols. Cairo: D~r al-Ghad al-'Arab§., 2: 147-148.
6. Ibn Manzãr, M.M., 1999. Lis~n al-'Arab. 18 vols. Ed. by Am§n Muhammad 'Abd al-Wah~b and Muhammad al-S~diq al-'Ubaid§. Beirut: D~r Ihy~' al-Tur~th al-'Arab§, 7: 267.
7. Al-'Ainain, B.A., 1980. Al-`Alaqat Al-Ijtima`Iyah Bayna Al-Muslimin Wa-Ghayr Al-Muslimin Fi Al-Shari`At Al-Islamiyah Wa-Al-Yahudiyah Wa-Al-Masihiyah Wa-Al-Qanun. Dar al Nahdah al Arabiyyah, pp: 69.
8. Lawrence, B.B., 1976. Shahrastani On The Indians Religions. The Hague: Mouton Publishers, pp: 63.
9. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Qur'~nic Christians, pp: 95-97.
10. Al-Zamakhshar§, J.A.M., 1995. Al-Kashsh~f 'an Haq~'iq Ghaw~mid al-Tanz§l wa 'Uyãn al-Aq~w§l f§ wajhi al-Ta'w§l . Ed. by Muhammad 'Abd al-Sal~m Sh~h§n. 4 vols. Beirut: D~r al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah., 1: 148-149.
11. Ibn Kath§r, 1994. Abã al-Fid~' Ism~'§l. Tafs§r al-Qur'~n al-'Az§m. 4 vols. Beirut: Mua'ssasah al-Kutub al-Thaqaf§ yyah, 1: 99-100.
12. Muhammad Rash§ d Rida, Tafs§r al-M~nar, 1: 337.
13. Al-Tab~tab~'§, al-Miz~n, 1:1 94-196 and 7: 237-239.
14. Asad, M., 1900. The Message Of The Quran. Gibraltar:Dar al Andalus, pp: 14.
15. Al-B§run§, M.I.A., 1958. F§ Tahq§q m~ l§ al-Hind min Maqãlah Maqbãlah f§ al-'Aql aw Mardhãlah. Andra Pradesh: Osmania Oriental Publications Bureau, pp: 318-319.
16. Oniah, K., XXXX. Early Muslim Scholarship in Religionswissenschaft: The Works and Contributions of Abã Rayan Mu~ammad Ibn A~mad al-B§rãn§. Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), pp: 209-210.
17. Moulton, J.H., 1972. Early Zoroastrianism: The Origins, The Prophet, The Magi, Amsterdam: Philo Press, 182-253, hereinafter cited as Early Zoroastrianism.
18. James Hastings eds., Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, 12: 242-244.
19. Ibn Hazm and Abã Muhammad 'Al§, 1985. Kit~b al-Fasl fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwa' wa al-Nihal. Ed. by Muhammad Ibr~h§m Nasr and 'Abd al-Rahman 'Umairah. 5 vols. Beirut: D~r al-J§l., pp: 1: 50-51.
20. Al-Shahrast~n§, M.'A.K., n.d. al-Milal wa al-Nihal. Ed. by Muhammad Syed Kayl~n§. 2 vols. Beirut: D~r al-Ma'rifah., 1: 274-277.
21. Al-Jass~s, A.B.A., 1994. Ahk~m al-Qur'~n. Ed. by 'Abd al-Sall~m 'Al§ Sh~h§n. 3 vols. Beirut: D~r al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah., 2: 413.
22. Zayd~n, 'AK., 1982. Ahkam al-Dhimm§yy§n wa al-Musta'minin fi Dar al-Islam, Beirut: Mu'assasah al Risalah, pp: 12.
23. Al-Shafi'§, M.I., n.d. al-'Umm. 8 vols. Beirut: D~r al-Ma'rifah, 4: 173-175.